ABOUT THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

How should society be governed? How should communities be structured? Download the free Great Books Foundation Film and Book Discussion Guides to continue the conversation. These guides were developed by Great Books Foundation editors, to extend the discussion of utopia and dystopia to films and longer written works.

This discussion guide includes references to *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* (2007).

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LEADING SHARED INQUIRY
DISCUSSIONS WITH FILMS

SPOILERS: Our film guides contain no spoilers through the Before You Watch section, but after that, the guides will contain spoilers. You may find it helpful to read the whole guide before watching the film, but be warned! Spoilers abound.

The Shared Inquiry™ method of learning focuses on asking interpretive questions in a group discussion about meaningful works of art. One of the many virtues of Shared Inquiry is that it can be applied to discussions not only about written works but also about cinematic works. There are some unique considerations when approaching Shared Inquiry discussion of a film. To foster lively conversation, pay attention to elements particular to the medium of film. The combination of story and the visual ways filmmakers create meaning will give you a wealth of discussable material.

Below, find some quick definitions of cinematic elements to help your group start thinking about the unique ways films create meaning.

**Cinematography:** The movement and placement of the camera in a film. Think about the height of the camera, its angle, its movement, and how it portrays space in the film. Also consider how scenes are lit, where the light sources are, and what kind of light a film has (natural, studio, even, harsh, warm, etc.).

**Editing:** The way a film is pieced together from individual shots and scenes to create a coherent, logical structure. Editing determines a film’s rhythm—are the scenes long or short? Does the film feel serene or agitated? Admittedly, editing can be hard to discuss with certain films because some editors aim for invisibility. But if a film feels unsettling, you may be able to trace that feeling to the editing on a shot-by-shot level.

**Mise en scène:** French for “to put into the scene.” Mise en scène is exactly what it sounds like: all of the props, costumes, characters,
actors, and settings that compose a film and its individual scenes. Questions about why an actor plays a part a certain way, why scenes look cluttered or spare, why characters always look a certain way, or why a film seems to have a blue tint are all questions related to *mise en scène*. Reminding your group that all of these elements were chosen to be in a film for a specific reason may help them generate questions. *Mise en scène* is a very broad term, but it allows you to analyze purely visual elements of film, which can be forgotten if you focus too heavily on the story or plot alone.

**Sound:** Both the score/soundtrack and the sound originating within the film itself. Though this seems fairly self-explanatory, this cinematic element tends to be overlooked in discussions of film. Imagine a film like Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* without sound: it would still be frightening, but the ambient sound and thrilling score contribute so much to the atmosphere that the film would be lacking without them. Think about how sound and image relate to or are juxtaposed with one another, and what sort of atmosphere they create together.

In addition to these special considerations, you should also think about the best logistical way to facilitate discussion. Watching a film twice is ideal (just like reading a written work twice), so have your participants watch the film once beforehand on their own and once all together before your discussion. If the film is long, consider gathering as a group for the discussion portion only. When taking notes, it’s easiest to refer to a scene’s timestamp if you want to find it later as an example in your discussion. Once you adjust to a few new techniques and different terminology, you will find that Shared Inquiry can lead to stimulating conversations about film, just as it does with written works.
Before you watch

Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner flopped in box offices on its release in 1982, but as we approach 2019—the year in which the film takes place—Blade Runner’s place in the canon of dystopian films has solidified. Scott’s interpretation of Philip K. Dick’s 1968 novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? is dark and dreamy, and the film’s pacing can be difficult to absorb on first viewing. As with Scott’s previous film, Alien (1979), Blade Runner definitely falls in the science fiction category. However, with its shadowy look, slower pacing, and compressed moments of tension, Blade Runner is just as indebted to film noir as it is to science fiction.

It’s worth noting that there isn’t one definitive version of Blade Runner. There are five different versions of the film, and among these five, there are two slightly different endings. We recommend using Blade Runner: The Final Cut (2007) for your discussion because it is (arguably) the best-looking and best-sounding version of the film. This version also has Scott’s seal of approval. The 1982 theatrical release includes stilted voiceover from Harrison Ford that the studio demanded be included to avoid confusing audiences, and it also features a slightly different ending. Scott removed both of these elements in subsequent revisions of the film, and by most accounts, the film is better without them. (However, note that the differences between various versions of the film, especially the ending, can provide fertile ground for discussion if your group is interested in diving deeper into the film.)
As you watch *Blade Runner*, consider the following questions:

- Who are the film’s replicants? Compile a list of them as you watch and look for clues to back up your evidence.
- What is the significance of eyes? Why do we see so many close shots of them throughout the film?
- How does Vangelis’s score function throughout the film? Does the music echo the visual components, or does it also function as a counterpoint at times?
- What kind of world do the film’s costumes suggest? Is there any defining look?
- How does the camera move throughout the film? What kinds of positions do we see most, and how is space arranged in the frame? What do these choices suggest?

**ABOUT BLADE RUNNER**

*Blade Runner* is set in a claustrophobic, shadowy Los Angeles, and the city’s smog is replaced by an ever-present downpour. The income gap is now a canyon, and the wealthiest humans have left earth to live off-world in colonies on other planets. Highly advanced replicants take care of the unsavory jobs on these planets—garbage collection, colonization, sex work—but are banned from returning to Earth for fear of a rebellion. Eerily, the replicants are also indistinguishable from adult humans.

Despite this rather sci-fi/cyberpunk set-up, *Blade Runner* also grapples with philosophical questions about life itself, in the tradition of noir. Noir most broadly refers to American crime dramas from the 1940s and 1950s that deal in murky, atmospheric scenes filled with seedy characters skirting the law. With World War II raging in Europe, many directors from Germany’s robust film industry fled to the United States and started making films suffused with then-contemporary themes—war, the fear of a world gone haywire, and a general air of paranoia. Directors like Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, and Orson Welles used films as canvasses to explore questions such as whether or not there
is a difference between right and wrong, or whether police and thieves are really that different after all. Visually, the noir films of the 1940s and 1950s left their mark with striking cinematography and lighting—you can almost guarantee that a noir film will contain venetian blinds, cigarettes, looming shadows, and dramatic angled shots, all elements that *Blade Runner* knowingly incorporates.

The film’s protagonist is Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), a former blade runner and a classic hard-boiled noir lead—terse, tough, yet also psychologically troubled. Blade runners work for the police on Earth and kill—or “retire,” in the film’s euphemistic language—replicants who illegally return to earth. Near the film’s beginning, Deckard is grudgingly dragged out of retirement by his former boss to retire six escaped replicants. We learn from Deckard’s boss that Deckard is a “killing machine,” but he still gets shaky after killing Zhora, a replicant with a snake tattoo on her face. Deckard is visibly troubled by his work as the film continues, conducting it efficiently but also wondering if his side (the law) is the right side. Is this the type of society he wants to live in and perpetuate, or is there a better solution?

Since the replicants in the film are pieces of highly advanced technology, many of the film’s bigger questions ultimately circle back to technology’s role in our lives. The replicants have obviously made life easier for some humans, taking care of society’s menial work and enriching the Tyrell Corporation (the replicants’ manufacturer) at the same time. But the film presents an underlying fear that these new replicants are too advanced, and that they may create more problems for society than they solve.

Pervading the film is the question of which characters are human and which characters are replicants, and what the difference is at all. Deckard’s career depends on distinguishing between the two, and he excels because of his ability to ferret out replicants passing as humans. But Deckard falls in love with Rachael, a highly advanced replicant who (seemingly) reciprocates his feelings, complicating their society’s dividing line between human and replicant. And then there’s Roy, a replicant whose brief monologue at the film’s end may be the most “human” part of the film. Roy eulogizes the loss of his artificial
life, of his memories, of his physical body, eventually letting Deckard live and return to Rachael at the end of the film.

Besides the great storyline, *Blade Runner* has plenty to discuss from a purely visual perspective. For example, start with the film’s setting: a darkened, rainy version of Los Angeles in the year 2019. The Tyrell Corporation’s pyramidal headquarters tower over the city, and massive screens advertise Coca Cola and real estate opportunities in off-world colonies. What kind of future does the setting portray? Why is it always raining? How does Scott’s vision of 2019 match up with the present day?

*Blade Runner* is also a very claustrophobic film. Streets are crowded, main characters are framed very close to the camera, and there’s almost never any wide open space in a scene. There are also plenty of dramatically angled shots recalling the noir tradition. The low-key lighting (film parlance for dark and shadowy) also pays clear homage to black-and-white noir films. Some of the costumes call up the noir tradition as well, like Gaff’s traditional suit and Rachael’s elegant 1940s look. Other costumes are all over the map—Pris’s goth chic, J. F. Sebastian’s mad scientist garb, and the wildly differing costumes of the unnamed characters that populate every street scene. On its release, *Blade Runner* presented a dark look at a future nearly forty years away, but within this futuristic fable, there’s plenty linking Scott’s vision of 2019 to the past.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is Deckard resistant to doing more blade runner work at the beginning of the film?

2. Why are there constant advertisements for living “off-world” in this version of Los Angeles? What do you think is the appeal of migration for people living in *Blade Runner*’s version of Los Angeles?

3. Why does Scott consciously connect his futuristic sci-fi story to an older genre like noir?
4. Near the middle of the film, Deckard has a dream involving a unicorn galloping toward him. At the film’s end, Gaff leaves an origami unicorn outside Deckard’s door. What is the significance of the unicorn throughout, and what does the origami unicorn suggest about Gaff or Deckard?

5. There is an obvious lack of animal life throughout the film. At one point Deckard asks Zhora if her snake is real, to which she responds, “Do you think I’d be working in a place like this if I could afford a real one?” What is the importance of animal life in the film and why is it regarded as a luxury?

6. When Roy confronts Tyrell, why does Tyrell refer to replicants as “organic life systems” if they are considered not “human”?

7. Why do the replicants refer to their demise as the ending of a life while humans call it “retirement”?

8. Eyes are used as a way to detect a replicant. What is the significance of Roy killing Tyrell (his creator) by taking his eyes?

9. Why does Deckard fall in love with Rachael if he knows she’s a replicant?

10. What is the significance of Roy catching the dove at the end of the film?

11. Why does Roy save Deckard?

12. How do the film’s replicants (Roy, Rachael, Pris) compare to the film’s humans (Tyrell, J. F. Sebastian, etc.)? Which group has more stereotypically “human” characteristics or personality traits?

13. Why did the Tyrell Corporation make their androids look and behave like humans?

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What does the film suggest about what it means to be human? What do memories have to do with being human?
2. Are the replicants in Blade Runner helping to create a better society?

3. Is there a difference between real and artificial memories in the film?

ABOUT RIDLEY SCOTT

Ridley Scott (1937–) first gained notoriety with his groundbreaking film Alien in 1979, which garnered critical and box office praise. Before that, the British director worked for his own company directing commercials, and then branched out to films in the late 1970s. Scott’s film career has been extremely varied over the years, including everything from thrillers like Watch Over Me (1987) to Gladiator (2000), an epic starring Russell Crowe.

In addition to filmmaking, Scott is currently the executive producer for the legal drama The Good Wife, a show that has consistently received high ratings and been renewed for five seasons. He also helmed the CBS crime show Numb3rs from 2005 to 2010. In all of his visual pursuits, Scott is known for his rigorous attention to detail, as showcased by Blade Runner’s complex, off-the-wall sets and costumes.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE’S AUTHOR

Tom Pilcher works as a production editor at the Great Books Foundation. He picked Blade Runner because the set looked totally fascinating, and because no one had ever told him anything negative about the film. He was also curious about the many different versions of the film available. Tom graduated from Lawrence University in Appleton, WI, with an English major and film studies minor. He has been gainfully employed at Great Books since February 2013.